PROFILE

JUL KAMEN — by MARILYN V. GREEN

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CREATIVE SEWING AND CRAFT IDEAS

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IN EACH ISSUE

Editorial 2
Letters 4
Special Features
Glass Seed Beads Are Not Just History 5
Customizing Cowboy Shirts 6
Simple Swimsuits for Kids 7
It's About Time 7
Net Darning: The Lacy Look 8
Shopping Information 9
Profile: Jul Kamen 40
Inspirations 41
Children's Sewing Corner 52
Worth Reading 53
New Products 53
Events 54
Publications 54
Commentary: Books for Summer Reading 55
Needlecraft Shoppe 56

The tools of Jul Kamen's trade include sequins, wooden croquet balls and refrigerator defrost hose. Out of these materials, Jul makes robots. In her job as cosmetic product designer for Pizza Time Theatre, Inc., in Milpitas, California, she designs the huge singing, joke-telling cartoon characters that entertain customers as they wait for pizza at the company's hundred-plus franchise locations across the country.

There are fifteen different cyberamic characters including Chuck E. Cheese (the "New Joisey Rat"), who serves as the organization's mascot. Chuck E., as he is known to Pizza Time employees, sports a snappy red vest and derby and speaks with a New Jersey accent. Other robots include a dull-witted dog, Jasper T. Jowls; Dolli Dimples, a buxom hippopotamus; and "The King," a guitar-playing Elvis Presley-style dog. "We design around what's available," said Jul. "Characters arise in all sorts of ways. For example, someone might come in and say 'I know a guy who can do a great dog voice.' We'll design a character to fit the voice."

Jul Kamen in her workroom

Characters start on the drawing board in Jul's workroom. A colorful painting of Chuck E. Cheese, holding a heart inscribed "I Love Jul," is painted on one wall. Bulletin boards are covered with sketches, and bits of sequined fabric litter worktables. When a sketch is completed, Jul meets with engineers who work out technical details such as how a rat will wave or roll its eyes. The clothing for the robot may have to accommodate and conceal a metal apparatus that allows its head to swivel. Jul sometimes refers to her "dress form," a mechanical skeleton with bulging eyeballs, when planning a costume or hairstyle.

Finished robots in the workshop

Once characters are designed, a prototype is built, and each screw and bit of fake fur is noted so the robot can be duplicated. Jul explains, "Ninety percent of my time is spent documenting things and finding sources of supply. Right now, we're looking for a source for pink velour for our elephant. The people in Ordering just called to tell me that pink velour isn't in this year. Chuck E. Cheese's fur was discontinued recently, and we had to have some specially dyed to replace it. I'll just die if stretch terry cloth goes out of style. We use it for everything; otherwise, we'd have to sew darts."

Characters are put together in an assembly room resembling Frankenstein's workshop. Storage cabinets are marked with labels such as "Teeth" or "Eyelashes," and a dress rack holds a row of costumes for a pig character — size, extra-large. A row of completed robots strum guitars while awaiting shipment to franchises. Ten people sit at long work tables listening to loud rock music and making eyes, hands and noses. Costumes and fabric parts are cut out with a powerful fabric saw. "We cut twenty layers at a time, and the fur really flies when we cut Chuck E. We use about ten yards of fur for a full-sized

Jul's sketch for "The King"

robot," said Jul. Costumes are sewn on both home and industrial-model sewing machines. The characters' heads are molded over hinged wooden frames and held shut with pieces of Velcro. If Jasper T. Jowls' mouth ceases to spew corny jokes, his head can swing open for servicing.

Jul Kamen feels lucky to have her job. She graduated from the art school of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, but jobs in art are hard to find. "Before I got this job, I had accepted the fact that I would never get a full-time job doing art. I thought I'd have part-time jobs to let me be an artist the rest of the time. I was really in the right place at the right time when I came to Pizza Time. I still have to keep pinching myself to remind myself how lucky I am! The company is young and expanding, and I love my work."

What would Jul recommend to a person who'd like to design robots for a living? "Learn the principles of design. Even more important are practical, concrete skills — such as woodworking, sewing, how to use power tools, and how to operate a computer." A sense of imagination is also a must. A person who can envision a creature with croquet-ball eyes and arms made from refrigerator defrost hose wearing a dress covered with sequins should do just fine.

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